



HMS Press Publishing BookClub BookLits 2020

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Remembrance Day: Three Essays

CPA BookClub BookLits 2001

Original ISBN 1-895700-04-3

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Beyond War Sentiment and Propaganda

by Ted Plantos Originally presented as a seminar entitled *From Flanders Fields to the Place Rotten with Dead: Beyond War and Sentiment and Propaganda*.

The League of Canadian Poets' AGM: Victoria College, Toronto, May 25, 1991.

When I first talked to Betsy Struthers about this seminar, I made the claim that all war poetry is anti-war poetry. Betsy was probably right to say this was too general a statement because, obviously, many war poems are written in the spirit of patriotism and in support of a war effort. But are these poems or propaganda jingoism and sentimental patriotic verse? I also make a distinction between anti-war poetry and protest poetry. Protest poetry is written from a political agenda, and thus belongs, with patriotic verse, in the category of propaganda. Anti-war poetry is not necessarily written in protest. There is no stronger protest than the truth revealed through war's reality.

Some might argue that a poet determines his or her own personal truth in a poem. Does this mean that T. S. Eliot, who was an Anglican, wrote Anglican poetry? Or that Ezra Pound, who believed in fascism, wrote fascist poetry? I argue that the poem determines its need to truth, apart from the personal beliefs of the poet.

The soldier poets who recorded the atrocities from World War I to Vietnam were dealing with the truths about mass slaughter. From his poem, *Celebration of Spring*, American poet John Balahan writes: *In delta swamp to united Vietnam / a marine with a bullfrog for a face / rots in equatorial heat. An eel / slides through the cage on his bared ribs / At night, on the old battlefields, ghosts / like patches of fog, lurk into villages . . .* Contrast Balahan's ghosts of war dead with John McCrae's in the poem *In Flanders Fields*.

Prevalent among the soldier poets was a disillusionment and change in personal beliefs when confronted with the realities of war. Truth will do that. From his poems, *The Invasion of Grenada*, W. D. Erhardt writes: *I didn't want a monument / not even one as sober as that / vast black wall of broken lives. / I didn't want a postage stamp. / I didn't want a road beside the Delaware / River with a sign proclaiming: 'Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway.'* / *What I wanted was a simple recognition / of the limits of our power as a nation / to inflict our will on others. / What I wanted was an understanding / that the world is neither black-and-white / not ours. / What I wanted / was an end to monuments.* Some might also argue that the reader determines what is truth in a poem. This is a polite Liberal sentiment, but it suggests that a poem's value is purely subjective.

However, twenty thousand men dying in the mud of the Somme is not subjective. Six [to eleven ed.] million men, women, and children dying in Nazi Germany's gas ovens is not

subjective. This is truth, and poetry demands nothing less. War is not solely a matter of personal truth.

Have we arrived at the point in 1991 where the truth about war is as simplistic as choosing what kind and colour of car we drive? Would a poem extolling the virtues of genocide be a matter of personal taste. In schools, generations of students were deprived of reading Sigfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, or Wilfred Owen because such poetry seared the conscience, while they memorized lines like Take up our quarrel with the foe from McCrae's *In Flanders Fields*. We must ask ourselves, is it true that World War I was a mere quarrel?

Are verses such as *In Flanders Fields* written from a strictly personal truth, or are they influenced by a political ideology and imperial order quite apart from the poet? The Greek and Roman and British Empires came and fell, and with each died their propaganda about the foes they fought. I decided to pursue my argument by re-reading the World War I poets. I began with John McCrae's poem. Published anonymously in *Punch*, in 1915, *In Flanders Fields* was the most popular poem of the war. This poem is a rondel, a French form that has two rhymes and usually consists of fourteen lines in three stanzas. The first two lines of the opening stanza serve as a refrain for the second and third stanzas.

One cannot question McCrae's poetic truth in the first two stanzas that offers a clear and poignant denouncement of war. But the final stanza is a call to arms using propaganda buzz word, Victorian moral abstractions and trite phrasing; and it has the effect of something that was tacked on because the structure demanded a third verse. The second stanza, opening with We are the dead, is, without doubt, a powerful shift in tone. And one can argue that this justifies another abrupt shift in the third stanza. But the second stanza is wholly consistent with the first where the author tells us about the crosses, row on row, that mark our place, while the third is a complete departure. Poetically, the one justification for the third stanza is that the man was writing a rondel. (Also, it was written at a time, early on in the war, when nobody, including the soldiers, could conceive of the devastation to come.) And the poem is only superficially consistent with the rondel form, since the third stanza is an abrupt deviation in tone, imagery, and language from the first two where the image of poppies is paralleled with crosses in graves, the singing of larks with the roar of guns, death with sunset's glow, and love with the slaughtered soldiers in Flanders fields. That the third stanza is flawed is evident when one reads the refrain with the third stanza and finds that the sense and rhythm are incomplete; whereas there is no such problem when one reads it with the second stanza.

Contrast *In Flanders Fields* with this passage from Sigfried Sassoon's *Counter Attack*:
'The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs / high-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps / and trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud, / Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled / And naked sodden buttocks, matts of hair, / Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime. / And then the rain began, the jolly old rain!' This is not the kind of poetry that British and Canadian children would be encouraged to read.

McCrae's poem was enormously popular with the very people whose ignorance about war perpetuated the lie that Sassoon denounced. *'You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye / who cheer when soldier lads march by, / Sneak home and pray you'll never know / the hell where youth and laughter go.'* From *Suicide In The Trenches*. Sassoon's anti-war writings almost landed him a court-martial, but Robert Graves interceded on his behalf and he was judged by a medical board instead. Later, at a sanatorium, Sassoon would meet and influence a young admirer of his poetry, Wilfred Owen.

Sassoon was a poet, and McCrae a writer of minor verse whose one shot at eloquence he compromised for considerations other than poetry. Nothing is compromised in Sassoon's poem, *Base Details*: *'If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath / I'd live with scarlet Major's at the Base / and speed glum heroes up the line of death. / You'd see me with my puffy petulant face, / Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel, / Reading the Roll of Honour, 'Poor Young Chap', / I'd say 'I used to know your father well' / Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap. / and when the war is done and youth stone dead, / I'd toddle safely home and die in bed.'*

In his introduction to the Penguin Book of First World War Poetry, editor John Silken quotes Wilfred Owen from a letter to his mother: "If you believe something is wrong you cannot, out of tolerance, or any other mode, convince yourself that it's right. And am I not a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" Silken concludes that "for Owen, killing was wrong." From his poem, *Spring Offensive*, Owen writes: *'So soon, they topped the hill, and raced together / Over an open stretch of herb and heather / Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned / With fury against them; earth set sudden cups / in thousands for their blood; and the green slope / Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.'*

Robert Brooke provides a more serious challenge to my argument. As Paul Fussell says in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, *'Someone like Rupert Brooke we would expect to be full of literature.'* Brooke is not in the class of Sassoon, Owen, Blunden, or Rosenberg. His poem, *The Soldier*, is a testament to British imperialism and has more to do with patriotism than the actual experience of war. Brooke was killed in action in 1915, only one year into the war. He died before the slaughter at the Somme and the devastation at Passchendale.

More patriotic verse is written in the early stages of a war before the brutal truths and moral conflicts that poetry must confront are known or realized by combatants or civilians. Even Kipling changed his tone later on in the war, after his son was killed in action: *'If any question why we died / Tell them, because our father's lied.'*

Silken states in his introduction that "*The English tendency is to elevate compassion into a religious sentiment and thus remove it from the earth . . .*" Isaac Rosenberg did not have this tendency. His poetry explodes with an art and sensibility totally foreign to 19th Century poetics. Although he draws on the traditional English pastoral mode, he does this in contrast with the stark horrors of the battlefield, thereby infusing it with a truly radical element.

Pastoral poetry would never be the same after Rosenberg, and Edmund Blunden, who wrote in his poem, *Third Ypres*: *They're done, they'll all died in the entanglements / The wire stood up like an unsplashed hedge and throned / With giant spikes, and there they've paid the bill.*

Ted Plantos was a writer of poetry and fiction and the publisher of *The People's Poetry Newsletter and Cross Canada Writer's Quarterly*. His latest books were *Dogs Know About Parades* by Black Moss Press and *Passchendale*, as well as *Mosquito Nirvana* by Wolsak and Wynn. Ted passed away in 2001. The Ontario Poetry Society has an ongoing prize for new poets called The Ted Plantos Memorial Award.

War Poems: A Rebuttal

by Carol Malyon.

Originally appeared in *POEMATA*, the newsletter of the Canadian Poetry Association as a rebuttal to *Beyond War Sentiment and Propaganda*, which appeared in the same issue.

I remember Allie once asked him wasn't it sort of good that he was in the war because he was a writer and it gave him a lot to write about and all? He made Allie go get his baseball mitt and then he asked who was the best war poet, Rupert Brooke or Emily Dickinson. Allie said Emily Dickinson.

Poets think about war and write war poems. We read them and are forced to contemplate war too. They are not an easy and comfortable read. Words can make one believe anything. They have that power. Rhythm helps. All the magical play with language. We are poets and know this.

Some day all war poems are really anti-war, that all poets are anti-war. But surely poets don't collectively agree on anything; they're not all vegetarian or ambidextrous or reclusive. What poets have in common is that they think; they feel; they have something they want to say and write it down. Their ideas intersect at some points, diverge at others. Issues are complex. If they weren't, then poets would not likely be writing about them. Why would they bother? What would they go to the trouble to say?

Readers aren't blank pages waiting to be written on; they bring their life histories with them when they sit down to read, their years full of experience, their philosophies, their biases and beliefs. They identify with certain poems and stories, and read into them what they want to. Readers have things they believe; they need the author to believe them too.

For instance, John McCrae, author of *In Flanders Fields*, one of the best known war poems. School children memorized it. It has been argued that the last stanza was added on, that it doesn't belong, doesn't fit in with the first two.

Paul Fussell discusses the poem in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. He writes, 'But things fall apart two-thirds of the way through,' and describes the third verse as 'recruiting-poster rhetoric' and 'a propaganda argument.' But all three stanzas differ from each other.

The first stanza; gentle, rural, peaceful. Although McCrae's poppies symbolize red spurts of blood, wounds, and scars, still the image was pastoral. The flowers don't simply 'grow' although such an action would fit the rhyme scheme. They blow. We feel a light refreshing breeze. We hear larks sing, just as in England. The crosses are there though, and the guns. The images are ominous as well as rustic. If one must die young and be buried far from home, this is the place that one would choose.

The second verse jolts. '*We are the dead*' hits with a thud. Simple. Declarative. Unexpected, even though the first verse mentioned 'our' place. The reader wants to protest '*No we aren't.*' The Dead, that is. And yet, why bother? We soon will be. A dramatic reminder of how recently these soldiers were alive, 'loved and were loved,' it prods us to remember our own flitting mortality.

The mood of the third stanza differs, is exhortative. It tries to make sense of things, to justify those deaths. Readers may feel no justification is possible, but that doesn't negate McCrae's right to attempt vindication. The torch image is rich with symbolism: light struggling against darkness; the best of a nation's young men competing in Olympic tests of process.

I have no difficulty believing that McCrae told the truth as he perceived it in this poem, and that he needed all three verses in order to do so. Surely it is a disservice to him as a poet to

believe otherwise. We read to understand other viewpoints, not simply to confirm our own beliefs. Otherwise we could just write our own poems and re-read and re-read them.

Toronto writer Carol Malyon was author of two books of poetry, *Emma's Dead & Headstand* (Wolsak and Wynn) and a short story collection, *The Edge of the World*, and a novel, *If I Knew I'd Tell You* (Mercury Press). Carol passed away in 2006.

Remembrance Day

by Leanne Tyla Ray

This essay will discuss the poems *In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae and *Bittersweet* by John Schleihauf. The first poem was written during WWI and the second poem was written about the same war.

In Flanders Fields was written during the battle of Ypres, one of the major battles of the First World War. John McCrae grew up in a small town in Ontario in the 1800's. At the age of fourteen he joined the Guelph Highland Cadets and soon rose to the rank of Lieutenant. Later he became a Major. His mother inspired him to write poetry. He studied medicine at the University of Toronto and became a doctor. During the Battle of Ypres, while he was sitting on the back of an ambulance, he observed the battle. He was looking at his friend's grave, a cross, and "the poppies growing in the mud was as though blood had been spilled on the battlefield and been transformed into crimson flowers." He was moved when he looked at this scene of the poppies and the crosses and wrote this famous poem:

In Flanders Fields

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row.
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the dead. short days ago,
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.*

The poem *Bittersweet* was written several years ago by John Schleihauf. He was inspired to write this poem when he read a short story by the same title, written by Lyle Bebensee (author

of *Green Applewood* and the audio tape *Titanic: The Last Male Survivor*), while attending a short story workshop at the University of Western Ontario. His favorite uncle had been killed in the war. This tragic incident made him hate war even though he had never fought in it. This event greatly affected him all of his life. He was in his nineties at the time of this interview.

The poem, *Bittersweet*, is about a mother, who is a Canadian Indian. After WWII she is still grieving over the death of her sons in WWI. The themes in both of these poems shows that death and memory of family and friends are universal. Both of these poems are written in rhyme and are represented by red flowers; poppies in *Flanders Fields*, and the red bittersweet vine berries in the poem *Bittersweet*. The saddest thing is that John Schleihauf now has Alzheimers and does not remember writing this poem. He died in 1994 at 96.

Bittersweet

Mother lays the waxen wreath
with her bravest courage plies
o'er the tomb of dead and deaf,
she hides her mournful cries.
Death is bitter, life is sweet . . .
Bittersweet. Bittersweet.

She sees her two brave sons
torn from her bosom bare
victims of the senseless guns
War is bitter, peace is sweet . . .
Bittersweet. Bittersweet.

Her silver stars brightly shine
from the polish of everyday,
her silver hair is heavily lined
in the cold November rays.
Age is bitter, youth is sweet . . .
Bittersweet. Bittersweet.

Each year she lays the berried wreath
and never questions why,
she knows in her daily grief
that they didn't have to die.
Tears are bitter, smiles are sweet . . .
Bittersweet. Bittersweet.

Then she wipes the tears away,
trying to forget the war
but the gnawing question stays,
is anything worth dying for?

Fall is bitter, spring is sweet . . .
Bittersweet. Bittersweet.

Leanne Ray was a Grade 12 student at Westminster SS in London, Ontario when this essay was published along with the ones by Plantos & Malyon. This is her second publication. She has credits in the London anthology: *Scribbled Secret Notebooks* and *Afterthoughts Magazine*. She is currently living in London, Ontario.